



The Division of Agriculture Activities

September 8, 2014
Find us on the web at:
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In This Issue

- [Director's Note](#)
- [Alaska Food Festival & Conference](#)
- [Tyonek Community Garden Update](#)
- [Bryan Bowen to Join PMC Staff](#)
- [PMC Assesses Chirikot, Wosnesenski and Akun Islands](#)
- [Animal Welfare and Care Standards](#)
- [New Dairy Farm Risk Management Program](#)
- [UAF Student Earns SARE Award](#)

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Director's Note

It is hard to believe that September is already here as it seems like just yesterday we were welcoming in spring. With the days getting shorter and the nights getting cooler every Alaskan knows what is around the corner. Whether the fall season is something you anticipate or dread it does bring an end to the hectic schedule of summer and with it a slower pace of life.

This past week, the Williams Family was awarded the Alaska's 2014 Farm Family of the Year. The Family was recognized this past week at the Alaska State Fair, in Palmer, for both their successful production of peony in rural Alaska and their community service involvement. Their farm, EagleSong Family Farm is located 40 miles from the nearest road system and is boat or air accessible only. They began their farming endeavor in 2010 and are successfully producing peony in rural Alaska. I'd like to congratulate them on their award and their contribution to agriculture in Alaska. Below, the Cabbage Fairies take a photo shoot and congratulate the Williams Family.



The Cabbage Fairies take a photo shoot and congratulate the Williams Family.

On August 31st, 2014 Peggy Hunt, Agronomist, retired from the Plant Materials Center after 12 years of service. I would like to thank her for her dedication to the industry and to wish her well in her new endeavors!

It is with great sadness I share the passing of two individuals, who touched many lives and played an important role in Alaskan agriculture.

Bruce Willard passed away on August 9th while undergoing cancer treatment. He and his wife, Linda homesteaded in Homer in 1959 and his commitment to agriculture was indisputable. Bruce was a pillar of the community and well known for his boisterous laugh and his quick wit. He will be missed!

continued on next page

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Cooperative Extension Agent Lydia Clayton passed away on August 1st, due to a car accident in Idaho. Her dedication and enthusiasm for agriculture was contagious and the Alaska and Idaho agriculture community have lost both an excellent resource and a great friend.

Once again, the newsletter has some great information. Be sure to read about Bryan Bowen, who will be joining the Plant Materials Center staff in November.

The fall 2014 Auction #473 agricultural land sale in the northern region will be open September 3rd, 2014. For more information about the auction please contact Daniel Proulx at 907-374-3716 or Erik Johnson at 907-761-3863.

As always, if you have any questions or concerns please give me a call at 907-761-3867, or send me an email at franci.havemeister@alaska.gov.

~Franci Havemeister

"The experience of ages has shown that a man that works on the land is purer, nobler, higher, and more moral...Agriculture should be at the basis of everything. That is my idea."

~ Nikolai Gogol



Marketing Section

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For more information visit akfoodpolicycouncil.wordpress.com



Land Sales & Grazing Leases

http://dnr.alaska.gov/ag/ag_sales.htm

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Students from Tebughna School work in the garden throughout the year.



FARM TO SCHOOL UPDATE

Tyonek Community Garden

For the last three years, the Tyonek Tribal Conservation District (TTCD) has worked with the Native Village of Tyonek (NVT) on developing an agricultural program aimed at enhancing food security and providing fresh organic vegetables in their off-the-road-system community on the West side of Cook Inlet. The Tyonek Garden began as an idea among a few community members and has grown into a nearly 2 acre operation with two Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) funded high tunnels (90ftx50ft), solar powered irrigation and ventilation systems, 15 raised beds, 1,000 feet of potatoes, 45 rhubarb plants, rows of raspberries, and plans for staggered expansion in the coming years.

In its third year of production, the garden has produced 375 pounds of fresh produce and expects to continue production through September including a large potato and carrot harvest. Produce is first available to community members in Tyonek and then made available to interested parties in Anchorage. This year the first harvest occurred on June 30th and was distributed to Tyonek Elders. The community harvest celebration on August 23rd enjoyed fresh basil pesto, kale, carrots, lettuce, peas, beans, celery, potatoes, pumpkin, zucchini, tomatoes, and fresh Tyonek corn on the cob!

Based on low nutrient and slightly acidic soil test results, it is expected to take many years to build the soil fertility in the Tyonek Garden to reach full production potential. In order to improve soil health the Department of Natural Resources, Division of Agriculture's Farm to School Program awarded a grant to help improve soil fertility and support educational materials for youth in the garden. This grant helped fund organic soil amendments for the entire garden, soil testing kits for students, and row covers for pest control and small high tunnels. Other funding sources have included the United States Department of Agriculture, the Rasmuson Foundation, and the Tyonek Native Corporation.

Although the main goal is to produce local foods, education and youth involvement has always been an important aspect of the garden for both NVT and TTCD. This year Tyonek youth have been involved since February starting plants in the school and transplanting them in the spring. Tebughna School students were engaged in turning in organic fertilizers and testing soil quality before and after adding soil amendments. TTCD hired four local youth interns aged 15-18 to assist in the garden three days a week. In July, the garden hosted a day of a local summer camp at which 35 Tyonek youth learned about soils, farming, pollination, and plant anatomy. TTCD is currently coordinating garden field trips with teachers (grades K-12) at the Tebughna School this fall, to harvest carrots and potatoes as well as build compost piles for next summer.

During a gardening activity one young gardener with little previous gardening experience proclaimed, "I could see myself doing this for the rest of my life." Statements like this makes the year a complete success.

For updates, news, grant opportunities, and announcements join our listserv at: <http://list.state.ak.us/soalists/akfarmtoschool/jl.htm>

For more information about the Alaska Farm to School program, or if you have any questions, contact Johanna Herron at Johanna.herron@alaska.gov or (907) 761-3870.

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Plant Materials Center (PMC)



Bryan Bowen to Join PMC as Potato Specialist

“Growing things has always been a passion of mine,” says Bryan Bowen, who was recently hired as the new Potato Agronomist at the Plant Materials Center. For the past two decades, Bowen’s life-long desire to be a farmer has taken the form of managing Agricultural Research Stations for the University of Wisconsin, highlighted by working with potatoes.

Bowen is a native of Central Wisconsin which is the heart of the state’s potato production, ranking third in the nation.

“It was the experiences I had early in my life with crops, animals and the land that convinced me I wanted to be invested in agriculture,” he says.

Bowen holds B.S. and M.S. degrees in Agronomy, Soil Science, and Groundwater Hydrology from UW-River Falls and UW-Stevens Point. The potato theme started after his graduate work in 1986 when he began working at the UW Hancock Ag. Research Station, managing fertility and irrigation needs for research projects. “Potatoes are a very flexible type of crop which can grow under a wide range of environments and management approaches,” according to Bowen.



For the past 23 years Bowen has served as the Superintendent of the UW Potato Breeding Station in Rhinelander, WI, selecting potato breeding lines with the goal of developing varieties to improve potato production and consumer quality.

“When I started in Rhinelander the first thing we had to do was build a research station that could support the long-term goals of potato improvement. Things here were in pretty tough shape back in the early 90s.” Today the station is a well oiled machine that is turning out new varieties for every market in the potato sector: colored specialty types, reds, chips, and russets for both fresh and French fry uses. Bowen says he is interested to apply the knowledge he’s gained about potato varieties to the Alaska picture.

After sending the fifth of five children to college this fall, Bryan and his wife Nancy are looking forward to a new chapter and are hoping to contribute to the quality of life in Alaska with the skills they bring with them. Bowen begins his new assignment in mid-November.

“When the position in Alaska was posted earlier this year, it took me back to 1979 when I traveled to Alaska to see wilderness and find work, which ended up being in the canneries on Kodiak. It was hard work shoveling fish and shrimp and convinced me I should take advantage of the educational opportunities that were available. It is amazing that the circle is coming back to Alaska.”



PMC Assesses Chirikof, Wosnesenski and Akun Islands



In July 2014 PMC Agronomist, Casey Dinkel, accompanied the United States Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) aboard the R/V Tiglax (research vessel), and



Erosion caused by hoof action from cattle



Akun Island – Eroding sand dunes

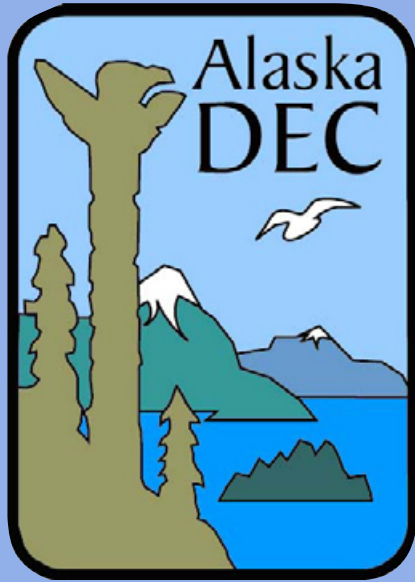
conducted a range assessment, forage evaluation, and erosion inventory of Chirikof and Wosnesenski Islands. Both Islands have existing unmanaged cattle herds that are currently under review by the USFWS for possible removal. Chirikof Island lies 80 miles south of Kodiak and consist of roughly 29,000 acres of flat to mountainous terrain. Cattle population of Chirikof is estimated between 750 – 1,000 head. Wosnesenski Island is located near the Alaskan Peninsula 35 miles southwest of Sandpoint, AK and consists of roughly 7,500 acres. There are between 110-130 head of cattle currently utilizing Wosnesenski Island. Casey was able to spend two days on each island collecting data, photos, and counting cattle.

“Both islands were very unique and presented very different challenges. Some areas of each island had been impacted substantially and had significant erosion, while other areas had little to no damage,” said Casey. Field data, maps, and photos from each island will be compiled into a full report later this fall.

An additional objective while on the USFWS vessel, was to complete a field assessment of a large erosional site on Akun Island. Akun Island is located 27 miles southwest of Unimak Island at the beginning portion of the Aleutian chain. Currently there are roughly 250 acres of shifting sand dunes on the westerly side of Akun Island. While on island, the goal was to collect field data and photos in order to develop a revegetation plan for the dune area. Casey said, “The dune area is in constant motion and continually eroding, I look forward to tackling this project and challenges it presents.”

For more information contact Casey directly at Casey.Dinkel@alaska.gov. or call him at 907-745-8108.





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Animal Welfare and Care Standards

There are differences in public opinion related to how animals should be treated and if farm animals should be defined as livestock or companion animals. In general, urban populations are growing and farm and rural populations are getting smaller. Of the over 313 million people living in the U.S. less than 1% are farmers. The public is becoming further separated from understanding life on a farm where animals are used to produce food. More people have traditional farm animals in backyard operations or own them as pets and there are aggressive campaigns by animal activist groups influencing public understanding of animal care.

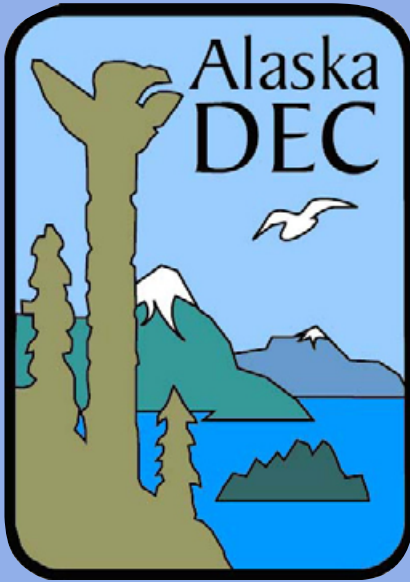
Each person's views on animal welfare are influenced by our personal knowledge and experiences, general public, hobby farmer, pet owner, cowboy or farmer. As an example, working trail or pack horses may live outside free ranging all year, unless they are foaling, sick, or injured. But show horses may spend much of their time inside a barn in their stall going out to a paddock for exercise and to allow the stall to be cleaned. So what is considered the optimal environment to raise an animal may be different even among animal owners.

Animal welfare or care standards should not focus on just one aspect of raising an animal but on all aspects, the whole environment surrounding the animal. As an example, let's look at the recent controversy related to raising laying hens. There has been legislation in California to prohibit the use of laying cages. Several studies recently published papers comparing different management styles. Chickens housed in laying cages have more movement restrictions, less space per bird, than open cage systems or free-range chickens. But these chickens have easy access to food and water, are easily observed, have fewer aggressive/traumatic interactions with other chickens, and show a decreased incidence of disease. In addition, there is less trauma associated with catching and handling of the individual birds during processing. Rate of gain and egg production is also higher in chickens raised in laying cages.

Free range and open cage raised chickens, have more room to move, but air quality in the housing area is not as good. There is a higher rate of aggression/trauma and cannibalism among the birds and a lower weight gain. With these open housing systems it is more difficult to monitor individual chicken's health and production and there is an increased disease risk and mortality rate. Free-range chickens are also exposed to the weather and climatic conditions, pests, and predators. So the animal's health and wellbeing are dependent not just on one thing, the amount of space available, but other criteria: environmental conditions, nutrition, disease control, general health, ability to observe and monitor individuals.

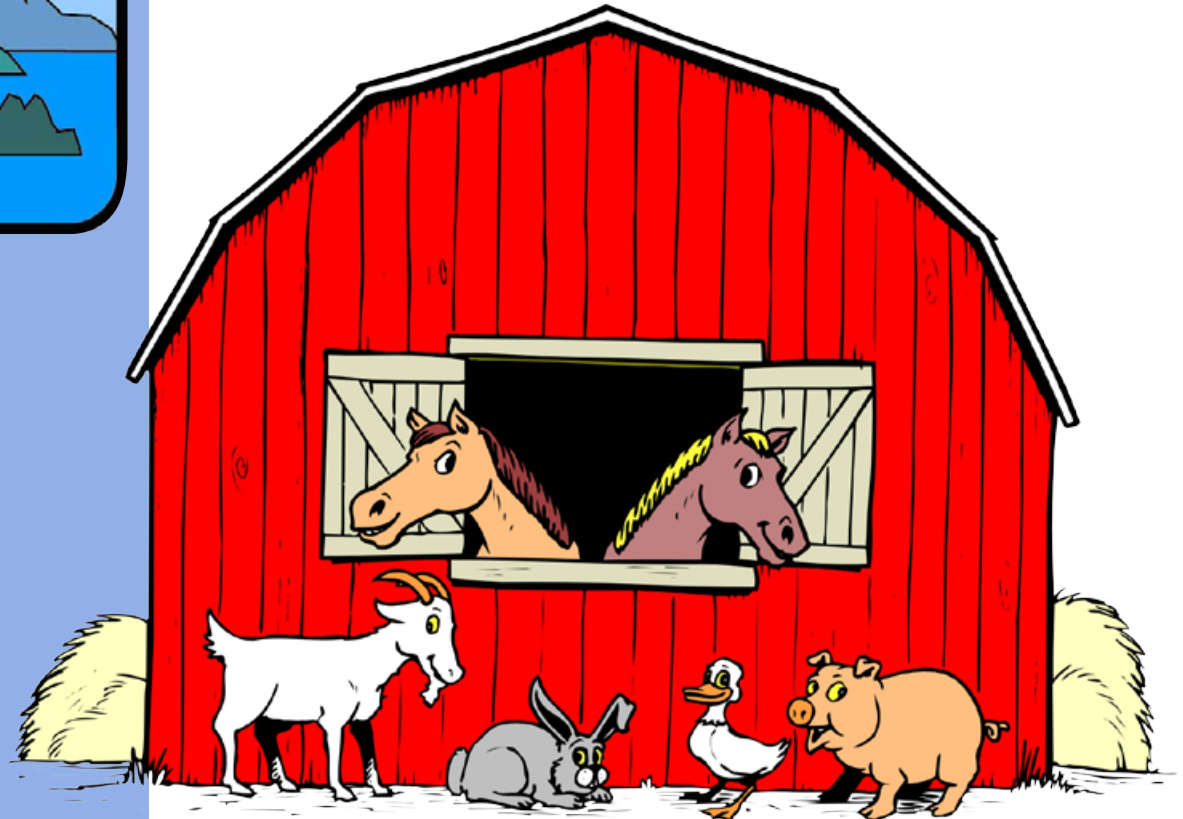
Successful farmers care for their animals trying to provide the all best conditions to ensure good growth and the best production (milk, eggs) to ensure they can earn money and make a living for their family. Farmers and veterinarians tend to use science based facts to make decisions rather than just emotions. They are trying to increase production efficiencies and do not view their animals as pets. The general public not familiar with livestock husbandry and animal care on a farm may view this

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to be cold/harsh or uncaring.

Animal care decisions should be based on science and relate to health, biologic function, and normal animal behavior. The challenge is to have a set of regulatory standards established that are objective, science based and acknowledge accepted farming husbandry practices or guidelines. Without regulatory standards farmers and veterinarians can try to communicate with the general public about animal husbandry on the farm but the public will generally make decisions based on emotions and often times misinformation from animal rights groups. The end result is that their decision may override any science based facts.



New Dairy Farm Risk Management Program to Begin September 2nd to Help Dairy Farmers Manage Unforeseen Economic Challenges

The USDA announced that starting Sept. 2, 2014, farmers can enroll in the new Dairy Margin Protection Program. The voluntary program, established by the 2014 Farm Bill, provides financial assistance to participating farmers when the margin - the difference between the price of milk and feed costs - falls below the coverage level selected by the farmer.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) also launched a new web tool to help producers determine the level of coverage under the Margin Protection Program that will provide them with the strongest safety net under a variety of conditions. The online resource, available at www.fsa.usda.gov/mpptool, allows dairy farmers to quickly and easily combine unique operation data and other key variables to calculate their coverage needs based on price projections. Producers can also review historical data or estimate future coverage based on data projections.

For more information visit:

<http://content.govdelivery.com/accounts/USFSA/bulletins/cc8954>



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UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA FAIRBANKS

School of Natural Resources and Extension

UAF Student Earns SARE Award for Ag Research

Story contributed by Nancy Tarnai

University of Alaska Fairbanks graduate student Laura Starr is pairing ecology and economics in her research. Starr, who is studying natural resources management, was recently awarded a \$25,000 Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education grant to continue her work. She is the second UAF student to receive a SARE award in the past 26 years.

The one side focuses on grazing impacts of intensely managed soil and the other the economic sustainability of raising muskox in Alaska.

“I love soil,” Starr said. “It’s so humble. Few people appreciate how important it is. I feel like it’s almost magic with the microbes being between mineral and biological life.” Very little research has been done on northern grazing. “It’s exciting to start something new,” she said.

As for the muskox investigation, Starr said, “I like the possibilities. This is about place-based animals. Just like camels belong in the desert, muskox belong in the north.”

Starr grew up in Point Roberts, Washington, on a peninsula, and went to school in Vancouver, British Columbia. After high school, she was a translator for a British sound equipment company in France and Spain, then sailed the seas with a cruise line. She joined the U.S. Army, training to be a pilot until a car accident derailed that career path.

Starr earned a bachelor of science in ecology and a bachelor of arts in economics at Evergreen State College in Washington. She met her husband Dean, an Army helicopter pilot, at Fort Rucker, Alabama. The couple and their two daughters lived in Louisiana and Washington before being transferred to Fairbanks two years ago.

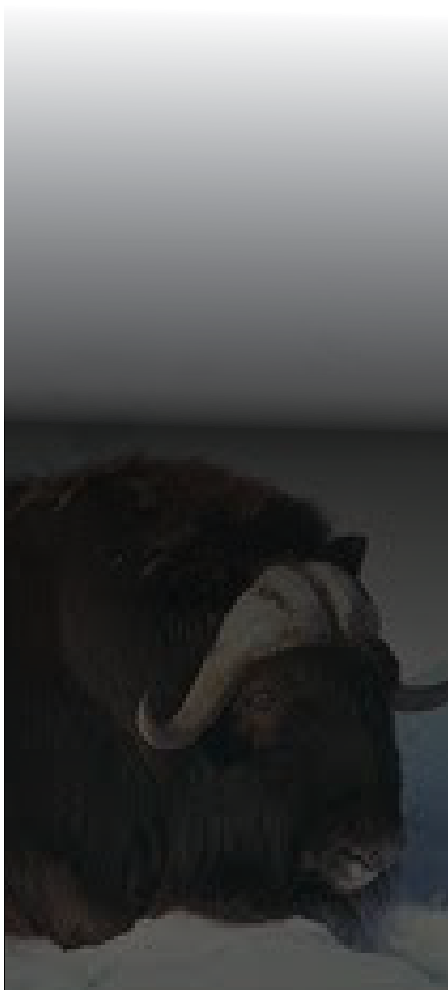


Laura Starr uses a Grass Master to measure forage at the UAF Large Animal Research Station. (Photo by: Nancy Tarnai)

UAF was the reason the Starrs requested Alaska, so that Laura could go back to school. “We wanted a post with a good university nearby,” she said. “I told Dean let’s go to Alaska.”

After discussing potential projects with her faculty advisor, School of Natural Resources Research Assistant Professor Jan Rowell, Starr decided to focus on grazing and muskox.

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“I don’t have an ag background,” Starr said. “But I know landscape ecology, which looks at the big picture. I look at farms as an agricultural patch.” She has been studying the methods of Allan Savory of the Savory Institute, known for reversing land degradation through holistic management.

“I’m seeing if trampling the soil works the way Savory thought it would,” Starr said. “I already see some differences.” She is testing the soil’s parameters, change in microbes, the physical properties of soil and plant species composition.

She uses a mechanical tool that simulates animals crossing the pastures. “We are looking to optimize the decomposition,” Starr said. “I shovel a lot of poop.”

The challenges are determining the methodology that should be used in her experiments. “I’m still figuring out the judgment of it, all the details,” she said. I learn a lot from my committee members on research design.

“Juggling life with research is the greatest challenge,” she added. To relax in spare time, Starr enjoys piecing together jigsaw puzzles and spending time with her family.

Starr’s goal is to eventually earn a doctorate. She was thrilled to receive the SARE award. “I’m going to use it for soil tests, new equipment and a part-time assistant,” she said.

She gives much credit to Rowell, who is not only her advisor, but mentor. “She is always looking out for me,” Starr said. “I can’t overstate how supportive and helpful she has been. I am very lucky.”

The staff at the UAF Large Animal Research Station, where Starr conducts her research, have also been helpful and accommodating, Starr said, as has been SNRE Research Technician Bob VanVeldhuizen.

Rowell likes that Starr’s background has two of the three disciplines central to sustainable agriculture: economics, ecology and community/culture.

Starr’s economic skills have been applied to an analysis of qiviut production and muskox farming, an agricultural enterprise developed and fostered in Alaska, Rowell said. “The ecological portion of her study is investigating the components of grazing in subarctic agro-ecosystems. While this is a new direction for those of us working at LARS, it is critically important to the health, welfare and efficiency (economics) of grazing livestock and to the ecological compatibility of agricultural systems with natural habitats in this state.”

Rowell said Starr’s work is the first step in the process and will provide valuable baseline information that can be incorporated into multi-disciplinary grants on grazing systems throughout the state.

“Laura is an exceptional student,” Rowell said. “Without losing focus on the importance of family, she juggles classes and research with motivation, determination and intelligence.

“Western SARE is a very competitive program and it’s a testament to her abilities that she was chosen as a recipient for their graduate student award.”